

# THE STUDY OF MODAL VERBS FROM A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: AN ANALYSIS OF TEXTBOOKS AND GRAMMARS<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *This paper shows how the indiscriminate combination of the form-function criterion in the traditional presentation of modal verbs brings more confusion than light to the subject due mostly to the fact that the grammatical simplicity of modal verbs clashes with their semantic complexity. In order to verify the treatment of modals in the EFL classroom, both a reduced but representative sample of textbooks and English grammar books will be analysed. Based on the findings of research conducted in this field, this article concludes that when studying modals in the EFL classroom the pragmatic uses of modal verbs should be primed over potential polysemic often indeterminate semantic values and/or grammatical criteria based on a higher or lower rank of graded modality.*

**Key words:** *Modal verbs, EFL classroom, grammars, textbooks, semantic values, pragmatic uses.*

## 1. SOME GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

**W**hen modals are tackled in the EFL classroom following the design of most textbooks, they are treated as a grammatical category and their form and function are presented on a pair with, let's say, the form and function of other auxiliaries (e.g., *be* for the construction of the passive voice, or progressive aspect; *have* for the construction of perfective aspect, etc.). However, the criteria used to classify and introduce them are not based on their grammatical behaviour but on their semantic capacity to express notions such as *possibility, certainty, obligation, permission*, and so on. The indiscriminate combination

of this double criterion brings confusion to the subject, for the formal simplicity of modal verbs clashes with the semantic complexity of the modality phenomenon. What is more, most textbooks and grammars generally opt for a sentential environment or, at best, a much-controlled discourse context to practise questions concerning meaning and use, thus increasing the feeling of imprecision during the learning process. This widespread situation gives evidence of the strong indeterminate grammatical-semantic tie that is at work when modals are taught in the classroom and of the complications that may derive from this situation. To verify the state of the art in the treatment of modals in the EFL classroom, we will analyse a reduced but representati-

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ve sample of coursebooks which will enable us to show some of the problems that may derive from the inappropriate unconscious use on the part of teachers of undoubtedly valuable pedagogical material.

## 2. THE ANALYSIS OF TEXTBOOKS

All textbooks selected are first certificate level and have been chosen at random among a number of books that have been recently used as textbooks in our first-year English Philology classes or that have been considered potentially valuable for use in these classes. In all cases, explanations and practice on the use of modals are found scattered throughout the grammar sections of these books; they appear together with other varied grammatical aspects such as tenses, passive voice, the use of the article, transitive and intransitive constructions, and the like. However, in the case of modals, this grammatical affiliation is invariably treated on the basis of their meaning, as little mention is made, with very few exceptions, of their grammatical behaviour and formal peculiarities. Some of the books consulted do not even identify modal verbs as such; they turn directly to the semantic values they represent although this is invariably done in the grammar parts of the units.

Out of the six textbooks that have been contrasted, only two of them (Fried-Booth, 1997 and Capel and Sharp, 2000) consistently talk about *modal verbs* in the sections they devote to them. Fried-Booth distributes the uses they study into two blocks: *modal verbs 1* and *modal verbs 2*, nonetheless attending to customary semantic crite-

ria, as has been said above. In *modal verbs 1* they consider those forms expressing *possibility* and *certainty*; in *modal verbs 2* they deal with those expressing *obligation* and *necessity*, *permission* and *prohibition*. Capel and Sharp follow a similar organization and present a section entitled *modals 1* where they tackle modals dealing with *obligation*, *necessity* and *permission* and a section entitled *modals 2* where they focus on modals expressing speculation and deduction. They include under the double label *speculation and deduction* *can* and *might* for *probability*, *could* for *deduction* and *must* for *certainty*. While the values covered in both books are basically coincident, it seems of interest to illustrate the potential instability of the semantics of modals that Capel and Sharp choose to include the common values of *probability* and *certainty* under the more general denomination of *speculation and deduction*, which may be seen as an indication of the subjectivity and flexibility that is found not only in the actual use of modals in real discourse but also in the theoretical basis adopted for their description. Capel and Sharp also describe *could* as expressing *deduction*, a concept that has not been found in any of the other texts analysed.

Contrary to Fried-Booth (1997) and Capel and Sharp (2000), Haines and Stewart (1996) and O'Neill et al. (1997) never use the term *modal* when they discuss these auxiliary verbs; in this sense, they indirectly draw attention away from their grammatical status as a distinctive formal category. O'Neill et al. (1997) refer to modals merely as forms, sometimes even mixing them with other subjectively-proned non-

modal verbal forms such as *suggest* or *manage*. And so, they speak directly of *may*, *should*, *must* and *will* in chapter 2; *should have*, *must have* or *might have* in 14; *suggest doing*, *suggest that* and *should do* in 15; *could*, *managed to*, *couldn't* and *must* in 17; and finally *had better*, *had better not* in 18. Haines and Stewart (1996) classify modals by combining values and forms. For example, in chapter 9 they talk about *suggestions*, *advice*, *warnings* and mention the values *regrets* and *criticism* on account of the forms *should*, *ought to* and *could*; while in chapter 10 they introduce *obligation* and *necessity* in relation to *must*, *have to*, *need*.

Spratt and Obee (2001) and Haines and Stewart (2004) fuse both approaches. On the one hand, Spratt and Obee (2001) use the term *modal* in two of the three sections they dedicate to these verbs, dividing them into more specific sections labelled: *ways of combining modals* and *past tense of some modals*, where grammatical aspects are covered. In the third section, where semantic values are focused on, they choose instead the heading *obligation*, *possibility*, *certainty* without any direct reference to the modal realization of these functions. Haines and Stewart (2004), on the other hand, use the tag *modal verbs* in only one of the several grammar sections where they deal with different aspects of modality. They include a section entitled *modal verbs of obligation* to discuss the uses of *don't need to*, *needn't have*, *be allowed to* and *can* (curiously enough, with the exception of *can*, these forms could hardly be considered central modals). And quite unsystematically, they label a second section *can*, *be able to*, *other ability structures*, while a third is pre-

sented simply under the heading of *probability and possibility* with no mention made this time of the term *modals* or of the verbal forms themselves. Furthermore, Haines and Stewart associate the notion of *probability* with the idea of *near certainty* expressed through *must* and *can*, and *possibility* through *could*, *may*, and *might*. If we compare this distribution of meaning functions with that offered by Capel and Sharp (2000), where *could* was associated with *deduction*, at least one thing is obvious: there is either clear conflict with the semantic values both books assign to modal forms or, what is more acceptable and likely, the meaning frontiers of modals are far from being as clear-cut and well-differentiated as students are, rather erroneously, made to believe, when modals are taught in the classroom, and for perfectly understandable pedagogical reasons.

### 3. THE ANALYSIS OF GRAMMARS

The treatment given to modals by those grammars which often serve as a basis for teachers in their preparation of the class-content or which are used to instruct prospective teachers of English is not very different from that found in the textbooks. Some grammars introduce the study of modals by placing them in a short textual environment (e.g. Murphy and Altman, 1989; Downing and Locke, 1992; Bolton and Goodey, 1996) and others work with different kinds of authentic texts (e.g. Freeborn, 1987; Thornbury, 1997; 2004) putting the emphasis on the actual behaviour of modals in discourse. Nevertheless, the major

rity of the grammars consulted stick to sentential contexts and classify them according to the double criteria of form and meaning. This is a fact that has varied little over the years and that applies equally to the more classic grammars (e.g. Thomson and Martinet, 1968; Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973; Close, 1975; Greenbaum and Quirk, 1990), the more modern (e.g. Swan and Walter, 1997; Parrot, 2000), and to those written specifically for Spanish learners of EFL (e.g. Alcaraz and Moody, 1980; Cruz and Trainor, 1989). A partial exception to the form and meaning combination, is Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985) which perhaps due to its extensiveness and thoroughness deals separately with the grammatical aspects of modal verbs (135-143) and with their semantic values (219-239), although the examples they produce to illustrate all cases are once again exclusively sentences devoid of context. In addition, some of the grammars which are intended specifically for use by university students go further into the theory and discuss the epistemic condition of modals (e.g. Cruz and Trainor, 1989; Downing and Locke, 1992). Furthermore, Quirk et al. (1985) and Cruz and Trainor (1989) go beyond the confines of form and de-contextualized meaning and also refer to the pragmatic function of modals as vehicles for expressing speech acts.

The particular behaviour of modal verbs gives rise in the grammars studied to many different subdivisions among modals, which make their analysis even more complex and may consequently hinder the teaching-learning process. In general terms, these subdivisions are based on two different criteria: their grammatical behaviour and their seman-

tic function. However, there is once more no general agreement about the sub-categories distinguished in this form-function dichotomy.

Regarding their grammatical requirements, we can mention, amongst others, the following classifications. Thomson and Martinet (1968) distinguish between modal auxiliaries (*can, could, may, might, must, ought, will, would, shall and should*) and semi-modals (*need, dare and used*). Freeborn (1987) talks about modals (the same verbs as Thomson and Martinet plus *used to* and *had better*) and semi-auxiliaries (*have to, be to, be about to, be bound to, be going to, etc.*) Parrot (2000) divides modals into two groups: pure modals (the same verbs as Thomson and Martinet except *ought* plus *need* and *dare*) and semi-modal verbs (*ought to, had better, have (got) to* and *be able to*). As can be seen, there are significant variations in the classifications used in relation to both the grammatical requirements they follow (even with respect to the traditional criterion regarding the absence or presence of *infinitival to*), and to the central or peripheral use of these forms.

There are also a wide variety of classifications based on semantic criteria. For example, Close (1975) differentiates between the primary and the secondary use of modal verbs (except *shall*), while Greenbaum and Quirk (1990) establish two kinds of uses in every modal: intrinsic modality (which includes *permission, obligation or volition* and involves some intrinsic human control over events) and extrinsic modality (which includes *possibility, necessity or prediction* and involves human judgement of what is or is not likely to happen). Langac-

ker (1991) talks about epistemic modality (its sole import is to indicate the likelihood of a designated process) and root modality (there is additionally some conception of potency directed towards the realization of that process). And using a similar terminology, Downing and Locke (1992) also distinguish two basic kinds of modal meaning: epistemic (the speaker comments on the content of the clause or evaluates it: i.e. *it may be raining*) and non-epistemic (the speaker intervenes in the speech event and brings about changes in events).

Along the same line, it is nearly impossible to find any consensus about the importance of the semantic values attributed to every modal verb when each form is dealt with in particular. There has been, however, a certain evolution in the quantity and quality of the uses of the modal verbs studied in the grammars over the years as a result perhaps of the importance increasingly given to the communicative dimension of language over a more prescriptive description of its normativity. The more traditional grammars (e.g. Thomson and Martinet, 1968; Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973; Close, 1975) tend to be much more exhaustive in their expositions of the semantic values of modal verbs and so they include complete lists of central and peripheral modals and a fully detailed revision of their potential meanings, some of which may be considered highly infrequent in common use. On the contrary, more recent approaches (e.g. Bolton and Goodey, 1996; Swan and Walter, 1997) tend to abandon the description of the less habitual uses and opt for the study of the more prototypical ones. Bolton and Goodey stress as well the fact that modality

may also be expressed through adverbials, thus echoing the tendency in late studies to reflect the importance that *the adverb satellites* of modals, in Hoye's terms (1997), play in the construction of modality. This is a symptom as well of the role that other contextual components play in the realization of those subjective aspects of meaning that were traditionally associated with modals.

A new perspective in the analysis of modal verbs can be found in Thornbury (1997), where modals, integrated in authentic texts, are studied in three different chapters: *Modality, Futurity and Hypothetical meaning and conditionals*. Thornbury (1997: 215) gives valuable information about the frequency of occurrence of modals in English, highlighting the importance of their frequency in common use with view to assign priorities when teaching this kind of verbs. Thornbury, who obtained these data from the Birmingham Corpus (20 million words), ranks the modals in the following order:

*would* 44  
*can* 60  
*could* 71  
*will* 77  
*may* 118  
*should* 133  
*must* 141  
*might* 155  
*shall* (*does not occur in the first 200 words*)

The number represents the position each word occupies in the ranking order of frequency. Thus *can*, which is 60, is the 60th most frequent word in the corpus. Thornbury (1997) regrets that the corpus

data does not specify which meanings of each modal are most frequent, though he links the high frequency of occurrence (i.e. would) with the extensive range of important meanings they convey.

#### 4. PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE ANALYSIS OF MODAL VALUES

In a recent article, Leech has drawn attention to the changing status of modals in present day use. He says: "According to an exploratory investigation we have undertaken, the English modal auxiliaries as a group have been declining significantly in their frequency of use" (2003: 223), and explicitly recommends "to those involved in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language" not to "waste hours of valuable classroom time teaching *shall* and *ought to*" (ibid: 235-236). This appreciation is in agreement with extensive research we have conducted and whose results have been published elsewhere (Alonso and Sánchez, 2005, Sánchez and Alonso, 2004-2005, Sánchez and Alonso, forthcoming, and also Alonso, Sánchez and Durán, forthcoming). As a part of this research, an experiment was carried out among native and non-native speakers of English in order to see the degree of agreement they showed in the assignment and recognition of semantic modal values to the different modal verb forms.

All subjects participating in the experiment were students at the University of Salamanca: the group of native speakers studied at the University International Program; the non-natives were first-year stu-

dents of English Philology. In order to obtain a network representation of the students' conceptual organization of English modal verbs, we used the Pathfinder algorithm (Schvaneveldt *et al.*, 1985). The Pathfinder generated a network of relations between the standard modal forms showing significant differences in both groups of subjects (cf. Sánchez and Alonso, 2004-5), the main one being that native speakers organized the modal forms according to what could be considered semantic criteria, while the non-native showed a tendency to prioritize formal and grammatical relations over semantic closeness.

To illustrate the nature of this difference we may consider how *should* was treated by both groups of subjects. In the native network, *should* was directly linked to *ought to* (presumably due to the fact that the two forms express weak obligation); but the non-native group directly related *should* to *would* and established a remarkable distance between *should* and *ought to*. Thus, in the non-native network, the connection started with *would* which was linked successively to *should—must—have to—had to* and then finally to *ought to*. This organization seemed to obey, first, a grammatical criterion as in formal teaching *should* and *would* are often presented as 1st and 3rd persons of the same auxiliary verb; second, it seemed to respond to a graded temporal arrangement alternating forms marked for present and past, as in the string *must-have to-had to-ought to*. In this way, aspects related to the quality, degree and/or intensity of obligation expressed by each of these modal forms were disregarded by non-native speakers. Later researches on the

recognition of modal verbs by native and non-native subjects and on the use of these forms in their own discourse production proved that students of EFL actually had no problem in the grammatical identification of these verbal forms, but encountered serious difficulties when they had to deal with their semantic values; the opposite was found to be true of the native subjects (cf. Alonso and Sánchez, 2005).

According to our findings, we have grounds to affirm that the unquestionably identifiable semantic values of modals, i.e. those around which there seems to be general agreement among native language users and which may therefore be considered prototypical, are much fewer and consequently more manageable than those listed in grammars and textbooks, and should therefore be much easier to teach and to learn. The same can be said of the use of modals in the actual production of native and non-native subjects, also tested in our research project, which proved to be considerably more reduced and specific than could have been expected in abstract terms (for a detailed study of all these aspects cf. Alonso and Sánchez, 2005).

Drawing from the data obtained in the experiment mentioned above, we are in a position to propose a skeletal but highly practical list of modal values which contains all the values that were agreed upon by all subjects that took part in the activity and which were the following:

*Obligation: must, have got to, had to*  
*Possibility: may*  
*Certainty: must*  
*Probability: should, ought to*  
*Ability: be able to*

*Permission: can, could*  
*Suggestion: might*  
*Offer: would*  
*Request: would*  
*Advice: had better*  
*Volition: would rather*  
*Promise: should*

As can be seen, the list disregards certain aspects concerning modal verbs and modality which have been traditionally considered decisive by most grammatical and pedagogic approaches, as is the difference between central and peripheral modals. However, we consider the list may provide a good and quite realistic starting point to introduce the study of modal values, as it is rooted in the point of view of actual native speakers of the English language and it reflects the present day state of the art, priming regular pragmatic uses over polysemic often indeterminate semantic values and/or grammatical criteria based on a higher or lower rank of graded modality. Part of the problem learners have to face when dealing with modal verbs concerns not only their ability to know and detect the semantic content of modals according to the values currently taught, but also the high amount of indeterminacy and flexibility that these verbal forms present in their actual pragmatic use in real discourse samples coupled with the degree of subjectivity that this flexibility brings into the interpretative process (cf. Alonso, Sánchez and Durán, forthcoming).

Evidently, the values covered in the list proposed above are not the only ones which modals help to express, and students of EFL should be made aware of this directly or indirectly. We believe, however, that this should be done by way of an extensive con-

tact with real instances of language which should be presented to students naturally, inserted into a complete authentic discourse environment rather than an intensive exploration of uses and functions in a reduced sentential context. We agree that at a certain stage in the course of the teaching process, it is advisable, even unavoidable, to tackle the double question of the form and meaning of English modals jointly, but at

that primary level we find it wise to opt for a simplified approach which favours performance over competence. This may help acquisition and develop a sense of confidence while a premature exposition to the wide range of meanings that may be covered by modals and to the variations of meaning which they may undergo in context may result in confusion and prove a hindrance.

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